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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a strategy for the criticism of curricula-in-use, that is, for the criticism of program blueprints and materials as they meet the educational lives of the people for whom they were designed. One aim of the curriculum critic should be to enable the reader to view the curriculum from the perspective of the students. Empathic understanding can be achieved by attending to and interpreting the outward manifestations of inward thoughts and feelings, i.e., by observing and interviewing students. This approach does not exclude analysis of program materials or discussions of the manner in which various "frame factors" influence child/curriculum interactions, but it must attend to important qualities evident in student experiences. (Author/BW)

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ALTERNATIVE FOCI FOR CURRICULUM CRITICISM

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"Alternative Foci for Curriculum Criticism"

In the last few years several prominent proposals has each recommended a different focal point for curriculum criticism. These proposals have included Valance's (1977) suggestions for adapting the tools of the critics of the plastic arts for critiquing curriculum materials, Werner's (1980) notion of editorial criticism that aims to explore the process wherein curricular documents are created, and Pinar's (1980) autobiographical method that requires from the researcher-as-student introspection about the significance of the curriculum in the individual's life history.

While each of these approaches can surely yield valuable information about curricula, none (in my view) presents a completely adequate strategy for critiquing curricula-in-use-- that is, for the criticism of program blueprints and materials as they meet the educational lives of the people for whom they were designed. The focus of this kind of criticism is somewhat narrower than the one evident in some pieces of educational criticism by for example, Bob Donmoyer, Gail McCutcheon, and myself (in Eisner, 1979). In much educational criticism all of the "common-places" of the educational scene are "fair game," including school architecture, the teaching, the demeanor of the students, as well as features that may be called "curricular" in the narrower and more traditional sense of that term.

I have written about and provided examples of how educational critics might portray the "experienced curriculum"--the experiences engaged in by students in classroom settings (Barone, 1980). But I have never directly or exclusively focused on the assessment of program plans or materials-in-use. In an issue of Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Bob Donmoyer (1980) presented and discussed excerpts from his criticism of The City Building Educational Program as it unfolded in a California School District. It may be the most enlightening example of a criticism of a program-in-use produced so far-- at least by someone in

the field of education. I add that qualifier because, to my mind, the most extensive, the most masterfully composed, the most fascinating, and the most potentially instructive work of curriculum criticism was accomplished by someone outside of the field of education. The program critiqued is the NASA Space Program. The work is a book of literary non-fiction written by Tom Wolfe entitled The Right Stuff (1979).

In previous writings I have pointed out the similarities between the genres of modern literary non-fiction and aesthetic criticism (Barone, 1980). This form of non-fiction as practiced by writers like Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote clearly satisfies Dewey's definition of the aim of all aesthetic criticism, i.e., the reeducation of the perception of an audience. The objects critiqued are usually public events and institutions and the lives of public figures. But The Right Stuff explores the interaction between a planned program of activities and the lives of those engaged in that program. It describes, interprets, and assesses, in language often quite vivid and evocative, the meaning of the Space Program for the early Mercury astronauts. It is--no matter that the author has probably never heard of the term!--a piece of curriculum criticism. And because I believe that Wolfe's approach to curriculum criticism can be instructive, I will refer to it throughout this paper to illustrate several facets of a methodology for criticism of curricula-in-use.

First, however, I would like to mention two examples of criticisms of curriculum materials written by curricularists. The critics were Beau Vallance and Hugh Munby, and each of the criticisms appeared in the pages of Curriculum Inquiry.

In a 1977 issue of CI, Vallance applied a set of guidelines distilled from critical descriptions of paintings to a curriculum package called "The Great Plains Experience." (Valance's article was followed in that same issue by the transcript of a discussion of that article by several educators interested in

curriculum criticism.) Munby's review of the curriculum "Philosophy for Children," accompanied by some thoughts on the nature of curriculum criticism, appeared in the Fall of 1979.

Both Vallance and Munby examined their curricular documents apart from an educational setting-- critiqued them, that is, much as an art critic would critique a painting or a piece of sculpture-- as a completed work, a static artifact. Or, to borrow some terminology from biology, their approach could be characterized as an in vitro or "test tube" approach as compared to the in vivo approach used by Wolfe and Donmoyer. Both expressed some discomfort about their in vitro approach. Vallance, for example, asked the following question: "How likely is it that what a critic sees and reports as a salient quality of a set of materials will accurately reflect the quality of those materials-in-use?" I agree with Munby's suggestion that those qualities will likely be radically different. Certainly program plans, and usually materials as well, undergo to some degree a process of adaption, implementation, and modulation by a teacher, and so the students seldom see the curriculum in the form examined by the armchair critic. The materials then exist not in a vacuum but as an integral part of a usually complex educational landscape. So do critics who review curriculum materials as did Vallance and Munby secure for themselves the best vantage point from which to view the curriculum as it marches onto that landscape? That question was asked by a few of the discussants of Vallance's article. Some of them suggested that criticism of a curriculum-in-use is closer to criticism of an actual performance of a play rather than the script, and is more like critiquing a musical performance than a score. To some extent, I agree.

For example, in The Right Stuff Tom Wolfe may attend somewhat to the Space Program as a script--as a set of blueprints for getting Americans on the moon and for enhancing national prestige. But his primary focus is on the process in

which NASA's agenda was played out. For example, here is Wolfe's account of the "procedures trainer" routine faced by the astronauts:

> The astronaut climbed into a cubicle and sat in a seat that was aimed straight up at the roof. The back of the seat was flat on the floor of the cubicle so that the astronaut rested on his back. He looked up at a replica of a console that would be used in the Mercury capsule. It was as if he were on top of the rocket, with his face aimed at the sky. The console was wired to a bank of computers. About twenty feet behind the astronaut, on the floor of Hangar S, sat a technician at another console, feeding simulated problems into the system.
>
> The technician would start off saying, "Count is at T minus fifty seconds and counting."
>
> From inside the trainer, over his microphone, the astronaut would answer: "Roger."
>
> "Check your periscope--fully retracted?"
>
> "Periscope retracted."
>
> "Ready switch on?"
>
> "Ready switch on."
>
> "T minus ten seconds. Minus eight...seven...six...five... four...three...two...one...Fire!"
>
> Inside the trainer the dials in front of the astronaut would start indicating that he was on his way, and he was supposed to start reading the gauges and reporting to the ground. He would say, "Clock is operating...okay, twenty seconds... one thousand feet (altitude)...one point-five g's...Trajectory is good...Twelve thousand feet, one-point-nine g's...Inner cabin pressure is five p.s.i...Altitude forty-four thousand, g-level two-point-seven...one hundred thousand feet at two minutes and five seconds..." The instructor might pick this point to hit a button on his console marked "oxygen." A red warning light marked O_2EMERG would light up, and the astronaut would say: "Cabin pressure decreasing!...Oxygen is apparently leading!...It's still leaking...Switching to emergency reserve ..." The astronaut could throw a switch that brought more oxygen into the simulator system--i.e., into its computer calculations--but the instructor could hit his "oxygen" button again, and that meant that the leak was continuing, and the astronaut would say: "Still leaking...It's approaching zero-flow rate...Abort because of osygen leak! Abort! Abort!" Then the astronaut would hit a button, and a button marked MAYDAY would light up red on the instructor's console. In actual flight the escape tower was supposed to fire at this point, pulling the capsule free of the rocket and bringing it down by parachute.
>
> The astronauts spent so much time hitting the abort handle in the procedures trainer that it got to the point where it seemed as if they were training for an abort rather than for a launch. There was very little action that an astronaut could take in a Mercury capsule, other than to abort the flight and save his own life. So he was not being trained to <u>fly</u> the capsule. He was being trained to ride in it.

Yes, Wolfe is describing how the astronauts played out NASA's script. But then during the course of the "play" something happened--something that occurs in classrooms, as well. The players began to improvise; the students changed the script:

The astronauts, as former test pilots, resented the passive role of riding in, instead of flying, the capsule. So using the clout derived from their national prestige and prominence they were able to alter that role, and in the process, the program. First, nomenclature changed. The Mercury "capsule" became a "spacecraft." Then the program hardware changed. A window was placed in the spacecraft. A hatch they could open themselves after splashing down. Why? "Because pilots had windows in their cockpits and hatches they could open on their own." Finally, they wanted manual control of the rocket. NASA was aghast, but control would be granted in several forms, including as "over-rides"--when the booster rocket engine was malfunctioning, the astronaut, like any pilot, could take it over and guide it himself.

So if the NASA curriculum was to impact upon the lives of its "learners," so the "learners" would also influence the curriculum. Of course, the changes in a program may not always be so overt and direct; younger students often lack the power to influence the prescribed agenda. Nevertheless, the manner in which students perceive and experience the ongoing activities, and the meanings that facets of the curriculum hold for them, are extremely important for curriculum critics to notice. And so criticism of a curriculum-being-used is not really analogous to the criticism of the performance of a script. Unlike an art critic or a theater critic, the curriculum critic is not concerned with what Vallance called the "intrinsic qualities" in a work, nor even exclusively with his or her own reactions to or perceptions of a script or performance, but must also, to some extent, consider the perceptions of the "audience" involved.

For the curriculum critic, furthermore, that "audience" is a set of students who are also the actors. And members of that "audience" will possess viewpoints and outlooks--"existential situations," if you will--that differ (at least to some degree) from the critic's, so that the meanings that the curriculum holds for them will also differ.

One aim of the curriculum critic, therefore, should be to enable the reader to view the curriculum from the perspective of the students, to expose the meaning of the activities for their lives. For example, in The Right Stuff Wolfe promotes understanding of some of the realities of the space program by transporting us into the world of the astronauts. We come to know the astronauts as people. Wolfe does not portray the astronauts as "Flying Saints," as the press often presented them, but as full-blooded human beings, the "first American single combat warriors" (as he calls them) who confronted and altered both the tedious and the death-defying activities prescribed for them. And this is done through a prose style so vivid as to evoke a strong sense of what it felt like to be an astronaut. His recreations of their experiences through language promotes, at points, an empathic identification with the astronauts. In the following passage Wolfe describes some of the early training of the astronauts in the Navy. It involves learning to land on the decks of aircraft carriers. Notice the point of view:

> To say that an F-4 was coming back onto this heaving barbecue from out of the sky at a speed of 135 knots...that might have been the truth in the training lecture, but it did not begin to get across the idea of what the newcomer say from the deck itself, because it created the notion that perhaps the plane was gliding in. On the deck one knew differently! As the aircraft came closer and the carrier heaved on into the waves and the plane's speed did not diminish and the deck did not grow steady--indeed, it pitched up and down five or ten feet per greasy heave--one experienced a neural alarm that no lecture could have prepared him for: This is not an airplane coming toward me, it is a brick with some poor sonofabitch riding it (someone much like myself!), and it is not gliding, it is falling, a fifty-thousand-pound brick,

> headed not for a stripe on the deck but for me--and with a horrible smash! it hits the skillet, and with a blur of momentum as big as a freight train's it hurtles toward the far end of the deck--another blinding storm!--another roar as the pilot pushes the throttle up to full military power and another smear of rubber screams out over the skillet--and this is nominal!-- quite okay!--for a wire stretched across the deck has grabbed the hook on the end of the plane as it hit the deck tail down, and the smash was the rest of the fifteen-ton brute slamming onto the deck, as it tripped up, so that is is now straining against the wire at full throttle, in case it hadn't held and the plane had "boltered" off the end of the deck and had to struggle up into the air again. And already the Mickey Mouse helmets are running toward the fiery monster...
>
> And the candidate, looking on, begins to feel that great heaving sun-blazing deathboard of a deck wallowing in his own vestibular system--and suddenly he finds himself backed up against his own limits. He ends up going to the flight surgeon with so-called conversion symptoms. Overnight he develops blurred vision or numbness in his hands and feet or sinusitis so severe that he cannot tolerate changes in altitude. On one level the symptom is real. He really cannot see too well or use his fingers or stand the pain. But somewhere in his subconscious he knows it is a plea and a beg-off; he shows not the slightest concern (the flight surgeon notes) that the condition might be permanent and affect him in whatever life awaits him outside the arena of the right stuff.

Of course no one can ever directly experience a situation or event as another person does, and so no writer (not even one as masterful as Wolfe) can recreate a scene precisely as viewed by another. But we human beings do have the capacity for some empathic understanding of others. And how do we achieve that understanding? We do it by attending to and interpreting the outward physical manifestations of inward thoughts and feelings--by looking and asking for clues about "existential status."

This evidence exists, I suggest, in three forms. In attempting to understand the meaning of a facet of a curriculum for a student, a critic might seek out these kinds of clues: First, we may observe students comportment, their actions, or what students actually do in the presence of certian materials. Secondly we may examine what students make--the tangible, physical products of their interactions with the curriculum, such as their homework, their artwork, their

science projects, and so on.

Thirdly, we may consider what students say. This may include discussions within prescribed activities or it may include remarks by students that reveal their attitudes toward aspects of the curriculum. This latter kind of commentary may be unsolicited (and so often occuring while the student is actually engaged in the activities) or it may be solicited by the researcher. This solicitation may take several forms. Leonard Berk has used oral interviews to gather information about the educational biographies of students. Madeleine Grumet, in her applications of Pinar's autobiographical method, has had students reflect upon their experiences in a written journal format.

The insights garnered through such solicited, introspective verbal reports can be valuable, but since these strategies presume a capacity for articulation of conscious awareness, they seem more suitable for use with older students--like the teenagers, college students, and adults with whom Berk and Grumet have worked--than with less experienced, less reflective, and less articulate children.

We can, to be sure, learn some things about the viewpoints of children by listening to them, but if we rely solely upon oral or written commentary we are neglecting some powerful forms of evidence. I believe that the most telling information can be obtained through use of formal and informal interviewing strategies combined with careful observations of students actually engaging in the recommended activities. We need to study how students comport themselves in the presence of the materials or as the curriculum plans are executed. What are the pervasive qualities of his or her experience as the child and the curriculum become engaged? How do the students interact with this portion of their educational landscape?

Consider, for example, the "Great Plains Experience" materials that Vallance critiqued. Do the students who confront the first essay in the reader find it as "moving" and "exciting" as she does? It would be easy enough to find out.

We might observe them in the process of reading. What is the emotional tone of the classroom during that time? While reading the essay, do a preponderance of students appear fidgety and bored? Or are they eager and intensely interested? Does an air of contentment or discontentment hang over the proceedings? And we might question some of them: Why did you seem so distracted as you read the essay? Because of a test scheduled for your next-period class? Because you were not familiar with the words used in the essay?

This dual strategy of observation and interviewing can provide the qualitative data needed by a curriculum critic to create empathic understanding with students. But engendering empathy is not the only task of the curriculum critic. Again, let us look at what Tom Wolfe does for the readers of The Right Stuff. We do indeed get to know the astronauts very well. And yet even as they begin to experience the training and the launches and the touchdowns and the press conferences through the eyes of the astronauts, nevertheless we sense that it is Tom Wolfe who is editing and shaping and even commenting upon those experiences. There exists what Alfred Schutz calls a "reciprocity of perspectives" as we see through the eyes of the astronauts through the words of the author. But that is not all. For then the author helps us to make sense of what we have seen. A good example is his explication of precisely what is meant by "the right stuff:"

> As to just what this ineffable quality was...well, it obviously involved bravery. But it was not bravery in the simple sense of being willing to risk your life. The idea seemed to be that any fool could do that, if that was all that was required, just as any fool could throw away his life in the process. No, the idea here (in the all-enclosing fraternity) seemed to be that a man should have the ability to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery and put his hide on the line and then have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back in the last yawning moment--and then to go up again the next day, and the next day, and every next day, even if the series should prove infinite--and, ultimately, in its best expression, do so in a cause that means something to thousands, to a people, a nation,

> to humanity, to God. Nor was there a test to show whether or not a pilot had this righteous quality. There was, instead, a seemingly infinite series of tests. A career in flying was like climbing one of those ancient Babylonian pyramids made up of a dizzy progression of steps and ledges, a ziggurat, a pyramid extraordinarily high and steep; and the idea was to prove at every foot of the way up that pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had the right stuff and could move higher and higher and even--ultimately, God willing, one day--that you might be able to join that special few at the very top, that elite who had the capacity to bring tears to men's eyes, the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself.

Wolfe accomplishes here what all good curriculum critics should at least attempt; he serves as a perceptive "outsider" who is revealing things he has discovered about the "inside" actors. He is providing a fresh interpretation of the "rules of the game" which (he says) were only implicitly understood (or at least never verbalized) by the players themselves. He is rendering things coherent, making them more real. In doint this, he does not only present his experiences with or reactions to aspects of the program, nor does he simply hold up a mirror to the thoughts and feelings of the characters as they interact with or reflect upon the program. He does protray "student" experiences, but he also, in an attempt to disclose their educational significance, perceptively comments upon those experiences from another vantage point. Students, therefore, need not be consciously aware of every quality protrayed by the critic. For example, if the critic (pernaps through questioning) uncovers a lack of student appreciation for the elegant pacing in the activities, the critic (I suggest) may still describe that quality. (He may wish to include reference to the student's lack of awareness.)

That last passage by Wolfe also points to another issue concerning this kind of curriculum criticism. The "right stuff" is a common characteristic of the value system shared by the astronauts. Should a curriculum critic seek out common qualities in the approaches of students to particular curricula, or is the more useful unit of focus the ideosyncratic perspectives of individuals?

Certainly individual biographies are legitimate focal points for curriculum criticism. Pinar's quest, through his autobiographical method, is to locate and publicize the important "biographic moments" lived by individuals. His approach, like Grumet's and Berk's, is in its emphasis on the unique character of individuals reminiscent of the approach of several child specialists in the 1930's such as Jean Carew. Their approach was also "holistic" and qualitative and steeped in inferences about the meaning of experience. Their aim, like Pinar's, was to explore ideographically the totality of a child's existence, in order to understand his/her actions in terms of his/her previous experiences. Such studies of individual children are surely very useful for some educational purposes (especially in deciding how to teach each of those individual children), but they do not offer much information about the patterns of interactions that pervade a classroom community of youngsters or a portion of one. They do not attempt to discover-- and so have little to say about--the commonalities within the experiences of students as they interact with features of particular curricula. But commonalities do, of course, exist. Alfred Schutz is correct when he insists that although the individual defines the world from his own perspective, he is nevertheless a social being, rooted in an intersubjective reality. A "shared reality" based upon a common humanity and a common culture or sub-culture provides an overlap in the perspectives of individual students. Particular configurations of qualities observed in the experiences of individual children using a curriculum can often be located in the experiences of many other children in the same classroom and in other classrooms.

One strategy that curriculum critics can enjoy is to carefully select and focus upon one or more children whose comportment reflects these general configurations--students whose patterns of interaction with the curriculum are in some ways "typical." What I mean here by "typical" is close to what Wilhelm

Dilthey, the famous nineteenth century philosopher of the human studies, called the "ideal type." For Dilthey the "type" is a configuration of values or motives, and the attendant meanings, in a particular situation. The type, therefore, can exist only in context, and so it stands in contradistinction to the nomothetic kind of generalization which expresses a general relation in nature. The typical, said Dilthey, is that which presents the general in a particular case (Tuttle, 1969: 86). The typical exhibits patterns in particular situations that are similar to--though never quite identical with--patterns in other times and places.

For example, in one classroom in which I observed, elaborate avoidance strategies were evidenced by one fourth-grader whenever he was asked to engage in exercises from a certain workbook. These actions were typical of (but not identical with) the patterns of comportment of an entire set of students under similar conditions. A curriculum critic could suggest the general pattern of comportment of these students in the presence of their workbooks through a vivid portrait of the particular actions of one protagonist. She might thus provide a more intimate sense of the experiences shared by the students.

This approach, however, does possess potential pitfalls: a reader may have difficulty distinguishing between features unique to an individual's experiences with a set of materials and that portion of the classroom reality shared by a set of students. Unless, of course, the critic clearly indicates which is which. Secondly, if the critic attempts to characterize an individual classroom personality he should avoid producing mere caricatures or stereotypes. That kind of reductionism can greatly diminish the credibility of a curriculum criticism, especially among readers who are familiar with the individuals being caricatured. A character, once introduced, should be presented in splendid complexity as her classroom life becomes intertwined with facets of the curriculum. If that is not possible, the critic is advised to avoid personality portraits entirely.

A broader focus may be in order, wherein the critic describes and interprets particular "indicator incidents" that are reflective of the general milieu. This approach, though generally less satisfying, is often more easily accomplished, for weaving the tapestry of an individual biography that includes patterns of qualities that are also typical often requires much effort and ingenuity.

In The Right Stuff Tom Wolfe introduces us to several individual astronauts. They are not caricatures. Their complex personalities are fully developed. We see the impact that the Space Program had on each of their lives, as well as the influence their own personalities had on the Space Program. But we are led to perceive some commonalities as well, including the exhibition of that quality Wolfe called "the right stuff," described above. As Wolfe focuses on specific instances of this peculiar brand of intelligent valor, the abstract personality trait is given "flesh-and-blood;" it is made tangible, made real. And vice versa, because he has revealed this typical pattern of comportment, we are able to more fully appreciate the individual lives of the astronauts and their actions in relation to the activities planned for them. The typical and the specific are engaged in a dialectic, and as a result, our understanding of each is enhanced.

What are similar typical patterns of qualities in the experiences of school-children as they interact with particular curricula? It should not be too difficult for curriculum critics to find out.

Some final thoughts:

I doubt that anyone who had examined the original plans for the Space Program could have accurately "prefigured" its impact on the lives of the astronauts. It is even less probable that someone might have guessed that the astronauts would in turn alter features of the program. This is no doubt partially due to the novelty and uniqueness of the program. Western Man had never before trespassed on this terrain. If Tom Wolfe had attempted to critique the original NASA "package" he would have had no past experience upon

which to draw. He would have had to explore the far reaches of his imagination for possibilities; and he would surely have been functioning more as a soothsayer than as a curriculum critic.

But that is not always the case with critics pondering curricula designed for use by schoolchildren. Curriculum critics attempting to prefigure a child's interaction with a curriculum can rely on insights garnered in the past with students in classrooms, and adjust them to fit new circumstances. And certainly some of what Munby and Vallance perceived in the materials would have been perceived similarly by some students, due to the overlapping of perspectives that derives from a common humanity and culture. As a result both reviews contain some valuable information. But both Vallance and Munby suggest that they did not go far enough, and I agree.

The approach I have suggested does not exclude references to or analysis of program intentions, blueprints, or materials, as those offered by Vallance and Munby. Nor does it prohibit discussions of the manner in which the teacher and various "frame factors" influence the transactions between the child and the curriculum during the process of implementation. It should even be legitimate for the critic to refer to certain qualities apparent in the materials which were not evident in the activities as they transpired. My contention, however, is that any critique that does not also attend to important qualities evident in student experiences during the "running of the course" is essentially incomplete.

Perhaps the biggest advantage to an "in-use" approach is its potential for enhanced credibility. How much more persuasive is a criticism written from a vantage point that allows us to oversee the actual introduction of that curriculum to some of its users? Of course, focussing in on an aspect of reality can preclude attention to other aspects. It could be that the vivid realities shoved forth in a portrait of materials being used in one setting would not be typical of

the qualities present within other educational landscapes. Maybe this approach will tend to yield information so contextual in nature that it hinders rather than aids the judgments of practitioners concerning the appropriateness of the materials for their students in their setting. I doubt that--if this approach is used well. But that is essentially an empirical question, and one to which we should attempt to find the answer.

Finally, concerning the question of feasibility. It is obviously more complicated and more time-consuming to study curricula in educational settings than in private. I have today tried to suggest some strategies for and advantages of an in vivo approach to curriculum criticism. Whether these advantages are worth the additional effort and expense involved is, of course, ultimately a political question that will be decided in individual cases. I hope that, more often than not, the answer is "yes."

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